



The MEEKNESS of MUG-WA *by* WILLIAM BYRON MOWERY

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JOHN MERNE drove his canoe upon the bank in a way to threaten its frail sides. There was snap in his manner and a glitter in his eye. At an imperious gesture from him, two Dog-Rib warriors stepped forward and lifted his birchbark out of the water. Half a dozen of them had seen him coming up the river and had gathered at the landing. Without wasting a glance or a word on them, Merne strode up the bank to the teepees.

Beside the first of these squatted a young warrior with an exceedingly solemn expression on his smoky face. He held between his knees a small tin box from which, by means of a crank, he was grinding out a raucous tune. Merne stopped and looked at him so stonily that the Dog-Rib ceased.

"Where come?" Merne demanded, pointing to the contraption.

The Indian opened his lips to speak, bethought himself, and remained stubbornly silent. Merne reached down, grasped the tin box, and hurled it over the warriors into the river. It fell with a splash.

"Papoose!" he growled over his shoulder, striding toward a teepee larger than the others.

A tall, dignified Indian of forty rose to greet him as he entered without ceremony. Merne overlooked the outstretched hand with a cold stare. Surprized and nonplussed, the Dog-Rib sub-chief let his hand sink. Merne sat down and motioned to the other to sit.

"You did not expect me, Mug-wa?" he asked in the dialect.

"Or I would have had food ready," the Indian politely answered.

"I came to talk, not eat," Merne said tersely. "It will be well for you to listen to me with both ears. I just tossed into the river a can of noise, so that you could hear me better."

"I am hearkening," said Mug-wa in wonderment.

"Last fall," Merne began, clipping his words short, "when the caribou migration passed to the eastward and you missed the killing, you came to me and asked for food and clothes. Your hands were empty, but I gave you three canoe loads. Then later, in the Moon of Ice, you sent two dog teams down the river with the word that there was no food in the lodges of the Male Otters, and that your women and children were even then starving. What, Mug-wa, was my answer?"

"You loaded my sleds and sent them back, with still another of your own."

"Your memory is good," Merne said with sarcasm. "But perhaps you have forgotten how I was paid."

"With a promise."

"Of what?"

"That you would be paid in furs. That our catch of the winter would be yours."

"And I have received the price of one canoe load."

The Indian was silent for a moment. He bowed his head slightly.

"I am sorry it is true. You did what no other of the traders, not even at the Big Post, would have done for us in our black

night of need. But the winter was too frozen. Not in twenty years have the Male Otters failed thus on the fur path. Early in the Moon of Flying Frost the ptarmigan and rabbit disappeared; and with them went the fox and marten. We hunted for food and found none. Our fur paths were long; and we traveled them in storm and still cold. But we took few furs. Not the price of one canoe load of food and clothes, though we have given them all to you."

Merne interrupted with raised hand.

"That is a lie. If you had secured but three musquash pelts all winter and had brought those three to me, I would have taken your hand a minute ago. I would have said, as I have said to the Male Otters in times before:

"Wait until the Manitou sends a good year."

"But you did not bring me all your furs, as the promise ran you would do."

"May I speak?" said Mug-wa with a show of spirit, looking up and meeting his visitor's eye.

"You will listen!" Merne retorted. "You are a fool to think you can deceive me. I know your littlest action. I should not deal with you again. I should not take your hand. I should even forget your name and call you 'The Liar!'"

"We gave you what furs we had," said the Indian.

"That," Merne repeated with emphasis, "is a lie! This morning down the river I passed the tent of man Sharpley. He was preparing to leave and go back down the river again. A Male Otter was helping him."

"He was not of my band."

"Another lie. He was one of the men who came with the sleds to me last winter. Now man Sharpley gets his furs and your warrior gets a can of noise and a belly-full of poison. Where did that rattlebox come from, if not the tent of this man Sharpley from the Edmonton City?"

Mug-wa was silent for a moment.

"It is true," he said. "The Male Otters have traded some furs to this city man, this Sharpley. I could not stop them. You would not give them conversation water and other things, as other traders do. I spoke to them of the promise we have made to you, but their ears were deaf. I am their chief; but am I so bitterly to blame

for their breaking a promise against my command?"

Merne's eyes had been glancing about the teepee.

"Another lie. You load the blame upon the shoulders of your warriors. You said not one word to them. Nay, more—"

He looked at a wolfskin rug, thrust his hand beneath it and brought out a new long rifle. He turned it over, for Mug-wa's inspection, and put it under its hiding again.

"It was given to me by Piwagasi, my warrior," said the sub-chief lamely.

"You are a brother to a jay-bird," Merne retorted. "You have a canoe, tricked out in black; the only one on the river. Three times this week that canoe has gone downstream and stopped at the tent of man Sharpley."

The Indian's head bowed until he was talking to the ground.

"It is true," he confessed after a minute of silence. The words came from deep in his throat. "I did visit man Sharpley three times and traded with him. But the furs which he got were worthless fox pelts. He is a city man. He does not know a fisher skin from a dog hide."

"But he knows the skin game," said Merne in English, for better vigor. "—, he didn't leave the city an' come up here for his health, did he?"

Mug-wa shook his head.

"May I speak?" he asked, this time humbly.

"You will listen!" Merne blazed. He continued in the dialect. "You have said that you traded the valuable furs to me and to him the worthless ones. That is a lie, like the other words you have spoken. I got the cheap pelts; *he* the costly ones."

He waited a moment for the Indian's denial.

"May I speak?" Mug-wa repeated humbly.

"You will listen!" Merne reiterated. "This week, while the river was still running full of ice, you took two black foxes down to the tent of man Sharpley!"

Mug-wa looked up quickly.

"Ho!" he managed to exclaim.

"Not only did you trade him your own black foxes," Merne continued, smacking a fist into his palm, "but you told him that you would send your men to the Antler-Hares who had a black fox; and to the

Windy Lake Dog-Ribs who had another. So man Sharpley has four black foxes that should be mine!"

"It is true," the Indian admitted, almost in a groan.

Merne cocked a finger of scorn at his host. "You have the tongue of a jay bird and the heart of a carcajou," he rasped. "I have the eye of a mole, or I would have seen



this in the ten years you have traded with me. But there is one thing which I have seen and you have been blind to."

Mug-wa looked up without speaking, impassive under the other's tirade.

"It is," continued Merne, "that a man may grow a face full of long whiskers and have a head of different colored hair and change his voice till it sounds like a ptarmigan bleat, but he is still the same man."

"How!" uttered Mug-wa, mystified.

"Listen!" Merne bent forward. "Almost every summer you have gone beyond the Fort down the river to the cities of the white man. Two summers ago, when you went, you had money with you from the sale of a good fur year. You came back with nothing. I heard about that, though you were ashamed to tell me. Why was it?"

"I learned to play a thing called poker," said Mug-wa with another groan.

"True, you learned the game called poker," said Merne, with a short laugh. "And the man who taught you the game is—"

Mug-wa glanced up quickly. A look of amazement seemed to spread over his face. He grunted.

"Wh-h-at? Do I hear straight talk?"

"Straighter than your promises," Merne retorted. "I make no mistake. I know. The man who taught you in the city is Sharpley!"

The Indian stared at his visitor for a short minute. He seemed unable to believe what he heard. Merne looked him out of countenance. With a gesture of infinite self-contempt, Mug-wa drew his skin cape over his head.

"If I should tell others," Merne continued in somewhat softer tone, "that the man who tricked Mug-wa in the city, followed him almost to his hunting-grounds and tricked him again out of four black foxes for a canoe load of child things, with maybe a rifle or two, the squaws would set you to making *babische*."

From beneath the skin cape came a groan.

"Because you have been to the Outside, you have boasted that you can match trick for trick with the white men," said Merne. "There is excuse for your learning to play poker; but here beside your hunting-grounds you should be the fox and man Sharpley the fool. You are a babe, still pink!"

Another groan.

"You have traded those foxes and they are lost. You can not get them back, though they would have paid your debt to me and left you enough to buy food for a winter. You have twice been tricked by one man, who does not know a fisher skin from a dog hide. And you have lost your honor when you broke your promise to me."

Merne rose to his feet and stood silent till the sub-chief ceased groaning.

"I have wasted a day to come and tell you that you are a fool, Mug-wa," he concluded. "I have always dealt honestly with you, and before this you have dealt honestly with me. I will give you a chance. Next winter you will easily catch furs enough to fulfill your promise. After this lesson you will bring them to me. I am going to make you send me four warriors and two canoes, to take my furs to the Fort before you go back to your lodges in the north hills. Send them to-morrow."

"They will come," said the muffled and meek voice of Mug-wa. "My almost-brother may not now believe my words, but I had intended to send four men to him, and word of my trading with man Sharpley."

Snorting disbelief John Merne strode back to his canoe. The Dog-Ribs after a look at his face, stepped out of his way. Around the first bend of the river he drew a deep breath and grinned.

"Pew!" he told himself, like one with the habit of solitude. "Didn't I lay him out! Hated to talk to him like that. Mug-wa's been a good feller. — shame, though, about them fox. For half a cent I'd high-jack this Sharpley duck an' take 'em away from him. But it's done now; no gettin' away from that. —, I thought Mug-wa had brains!"

When he was past the first white water and over-falls, he broke into "A la Claire Fontaine," and paddled swiftly down the river. Between verses he shook his head and ejaculated—

"—, I thought he had brains!"

 THE next day at noon Sharpley paddling his canoe clumsily, landed at Merne's one-building station. Besides outfit, he had one small pack which he carried with him, as if to keep it safe, when he came up toward Merne. His manner was exultant.

"Howd'y?" he began.

Merne looked at him without answering.

"Got any grub?" Sharpley demanded. "I'm out."

"I have," Merne answered. "But I'm careful who I give it to."

Sharpley's grin became ugly.

"Meanin' what?"

"You're poachin' on my territory when you come up here tradin' your gimcracks an' rot-gut to t' Injuns."

"I guess they're anybody's pluckin', ain't they? Youse don't own 'em, do youse?"

"No, but I got some right to t' fur they caught last winter. I own that pack you got in your hand."

"T' — youse do!" Sharpley snorted.

"But I wouldn't have t' — things

now," Merne snapped. "Suppose you mosey along."

Sharpley opened his lips for one foul word, addressed straight at Merne. The latter jumped in and caught him on the jaw. The pack went spinning as Sharpley reeled backward. Merne hit him again, flush on the chin; and Sharpley tumbled. With a hand twisted into his coat collar, Merne assisted him to the canoe.

"See how quick you can get out of sight," he said huskily, flinging the pack in after him. "An' don't come up this way ag'in You belong in an alley, not in a woods. That's warnin'. Get!"

Sharpley went.

He was barely out of sight when two Dog-Rib canoes and four of Mug-wa's men came down the river. The oldest jumped out of his boat and stepped up to Merne.

"Mug-wa said we are to stay with you until you have no further need of us."

Merne nodded.

"Also, Mug-wa sends word of greeting and a message," concluded the Indian, taking a small can from his shoulder-pack. "He said that yesterday the words of his white brother smote him like hailstones so that he could not speak."

John Merne turned the can over, pried off the lid and looked inside, expecting to find a written message there, for the sub-chief read and wrote creditably. But the can was empty. Puzzled, Merne thrust two fingers inside. Nothing but some black stain.

Mystified, he turned the can over again. There was some gilt charactery, by way of a label, on the outside. He read it. Re-read it with a gasp.

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